

## A magnificent gift: Jan Patocka and Vaclav Havel on dissident sacrifice

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## **Introduction**

In considering the meaning of a dissident sacrifice, there is a tendency to associate the meaning of the act with how the public receives the sacrifice. For example, the self-immolation of an individual, if it incites a riot, is remembered and praised; if it receives no public attention, then those who hear of it may say ‘what a waste’. How a public perceives a sacrifice is largely a matter of accident, there is no formula for inciting a revolution through a martyrdom, hence one might want to claim that the meaning of a dissident sacrifice is reliant on contingency. The tragic statistics on the website for the International Campaign for Tibet, where the names of over 140 individuals who have self-immolated as an act of resistance is testament to the contingency of the reception.<sup>1</sup> This is clearly not very helpful for understanding the political significance of a sacrifice and so the concept opens for analysis. This paper attempts to explore the meaning of dissident sacrifice by unpacking the moral and political significance in two differing accounts of sacrifice – that of Jan Patočka and Vaclav Havel. Essentially this paper asks whether only certain kinds of people can be meaningful sacrifices, and if there are on what grounds do we expect them to make a sacrifice?

Aristotle’s thoughts on magnificence are a worthwhile consideration to begin this exploration, as he argues that a person of high social standing and wealth has more to give than one who does not.<sup>2</sup> Hence magnificence can only be expected by one who has a great deal to give. Transposing the argument to dissent we can ask, can one give more in dissent than another, due to their position or standing? To continue with the simile, the magnificent man is like an artist who acts in a way that is most fitting, that is they consider how the

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<sup>1</sup> International Campaign for Tibet, “Self immolations by Tibetans” September 4, 2015, <http://www.savetibet.org/resources/fact-sheets/self-immolations-by-tibetans/> (accessed January 5 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 65

production of the most beauty can be achieved for the community rather than considering the cost of the production.<sup>3</sup> The magnificent man spends large sums fittingly and liberally. For Aristotle the poor man cannot be magnificent because the poor man has no means with which to spend large sums.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, for Aristotle, the poor man who tries to act magnificently is a fool because he is acting beyond what can be expected of him.<sup>5</sup> In the dissident sacrifice the expenditure is with one's life. The dissident offers a gift of death to the community by placing themselves at risk through their actions. A dissident sacrifice is an attempt at bringing beauty or goodness to the community through an act of civil disobedience. This beauty is to come through spending one's life fittingly. Hence the question, are all sacrifices equal? Also the additional question arises, can dissidence only be expected of certain people (from certain social positions), and if so are people who try to be dissidents who don't have the high positions from which to give a sacrifice being silly – would they be better off not making a sacrifice?

These questions can be well posed through a thought experiment. A person, living in totalitarian conditions with no public profile and relatively few friends, all of whom are also without public profile, writes a letter to the government outlining the problems that she has with the system. She is being existentially honest with herself in writing the letter, in that she is expressing sincere doubts about the lack of justice in the state. She sends copies of her letter to her friends and the foreign news. Not having a network of dissidents to distribute material through, many copies of her letter are intercepted by the censors and do not reach their intended audience. Her friends that do get the letter, immediately burn it sensing the potential danger in being associated with it. The woman is promptly removed from her home, placed in jail, and is disappeared.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 65.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid 66

<sup>5</sup>Ibid

In comparison, a film director living under the same totalitarian state makes a short film outlining the horrors of the system in which he (and the woman) live. The film is smuggled out of the country and receives a high degree of attention. At home the film is shown in underground cinemas to a community of dissidents who all agree that the film portrays their daily struggle well. Those dissidents who see it decide to make protest art of their own. The film maker is rounded up and disappears. People known to have watched it are disappeared as well and there is a lot of publicity around these arrests and disappearances.

In both of these examples the protagonist makes a decision to act in an existentially honest way and stand up to an oppressive system. They make their challenge in what seems like the best way that they can. They both have one life to give and both risk it freely. Can we say that the film maker makes a more important sacrifice because his sacrifice is publicly received? To the extent that she can the woman is acting publicly. Her concerns are for the community; her intentions are the same as the film makers. Jan Patočka's and Vaclav Havel's respective writing on sacrifice seem to give us no good reason for judging the two examples differently in terms of the magnitude of their sacrifice. What separates the examples is the fittingness of their actions. I will argue that essentially the effect, or degree of publicity, are not in themselves criteria for judging a dissident sacrifice. In Patočka's thought there is a heroic inflection to sacrifice which is lost in Havel's writing. Sacrifice for Patočka is more about a rupture with the ordinary and everyday whereas for Havel sacrifice has a practical political element, which, although heavily coloured by Patočka's thought is unique because of the focus on sacrifice's political dimension.

For both Patočka and Havel meaningful action begins in a phenomenological process. Reflection allows one to become 'shaken' in Patočka's words, or, it allows one to realise one's powerless power in Havel's words. It can be said therefore that reflection allows one to consider what is most fitting for the community and to consider what is the best way to 'care

for one's soul.' It is in the varying understandings of reflection and the link between reflection and care for the soul that we can begin to use Patočka and Havel's thought to make pronouncements on judging sacrifices.

### **Patočka on care for the soul and reflection**

Caring for the soul is described by Patočka in *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*.

Care for the soul means that truth is something not given once and for all, nor merely a matter of observing and acknowledging the observed, but rather a lifelong inquiry, a self-controlling, self-unifying intellectual and vital practice.<sup>6</sup>

For Patočka, caring for the soul is the process of philosophy that shows to the self how best to live, and also, in this reflection on living, how best to die – that is how to be-towards-death.<sup>7</sup> Patočka understands care in a Heideggerian way as the movement of existence in world of things and others.<sup>8</sup> Care is also understood as acting towards the world. The most profound expression of care is care for ourselves - for our own being.<sup>9</sup> Care for the soul (care for our own being) involves a phenomenological reduction to understand the context in which we are relating to the world and encountering the world.<sup>10</sup> This reduction reveals to us the possibilities that are manifest in phenomena as they present to us. That is, through care for the soul we transcend appearance and become aware of the possibilities and transcendence

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<sup>6</sup> Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, trans. Erazim Kohak (Chicago: Open Court Publishing) 82. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as HE.

<sup>7</sup> See, Edward Findlay, *Caring for the Soul in a Postmodern Age*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 65-68.

See also, Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed, trans. David Wills (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> Jan Patočka *Body Community Language World*, trans. Erazim Kohak, (Chicago: Open Court, 1998), 143

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 164

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

inherent in every moment.<sup>11</sup> Hence the phenomenological reduction, for Patočka does not reveal the thing in itself to us as it might in Husserl, rather this kind of reflection reveals the possibility of transcendence to an embodied and contextualised existent who is a being in motion, moving between possibilities.<sup>12</sup> In other words care for the soul, for Patočka is taking responsibility for how we live in the world.

Patočka describes human existence as three kinds of movement. These movements are mutually exclusive and simultaneous. That is all three movements occur in the human being at once. The first movement is the movement of sinking roots, what Patočka calls anchoring.<sup>13</sup> This is a movement of finding oneself in the world instinctively. It is a movement associated with discovering our corporeality and finding a harmonious place in the world amongst things of which we ourselves are also a thing. The second movement is that of self-sustenance and self-projection.<sup>14</sup> This is the movement of human work - of coming to terms with the world through work. That is through using the things in the world. This is the world of meaning in which we extend our existence from our body into things.<sup>15</sup> The third movement is the movement of existence which looks to make a global closure on the first two movements.<sup>16</sup> It is the “movement of existence in the true sense.”<sup>17</sup> What Patočka means is that the third movement grasps the other two movements in a movement of reflection. In the reflection of the third movement all that is neglected in the other two movements is revealed. The self asks, ‘what am I not doing?’ The existent comes to terms with existence and this coming to terms is the movement of existence. The presentation of Being as a question and the integration of all spheres of human meaning into an accounting for that question.

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid 165

<sup>12</sup>Ibid 165-166

<sup>13</sup>Ibid 148.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid 150

<sup>16</sup>Ibid 148.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid 151.

The nature of humanity can be found in the third movement, in the self's accounting for itself. Hence a life without reflection is a life that is less than fully human. The third movement allows human to come to terms with their finitude and hence overcome the particularity of life and understand life as a whole. This third movement puts us into conflict with ideological abstractions which pervade the political spheres in which we live by showing them how they fail to grasp the whole which they claim to lay hand to.<sup>18</sup> In other words, it is through conflict introduced through reflection that the individual sees their life not as a particular life but a true, embedded and engaged life.

Thus at the centre of our world the point is to reach from a merely given life to the emergence of a true life, and that is achieved in the movement that shakes the objective rootedness and alienation in a role, in objectification...<sup>19</sup>

For Patočka, the third movement “shakes” all of the roles that we occupy in our everyday life through our confrontation with finitude. When shaken, one sees life as a whole and hence one is aware of responsibility as one is aware of the extent that one impacts on others in the greater scheme of things.

The idea of the shaken is a key concept in Patočka's *Heretical Essays*. Patočka argues that in the modern day the third movement has been quashed by the forces of history.<sup>20</sup> The argument of the *Heretical Essays* is that history set up the conditions for caring for the soul until modernity, in turning the world into a calculable, measurable world of things (and only things) has lost the ability to transcend life in its particularity.<sup>21</sup> In other words modernity has

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<sup>18</sup> Jan Patočka 'The Dangers of Technization in Science according to E. Husserl and the Essence of Technology as Danger according to M. Heidegger' in *Jan Patočka; Philosophy and Selected Writing*, Erazim Kohak ed. And trans. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), 328-329

<sup>19</sup> Jan Patočka 'The "Natural" World and Phenomenology' in *Jan Patočka; Philosophy and Selected Writing*, Erazim Kohak ed. And trans. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), 263

<sup>20</sup> Patočka *Heretical*, 127.

<sup>21</sup> Patočka, 'Dangers of Technicization', 332.

forgotten responsibility. This is a Heideggerian argument and Patočka is explicitly borrowing from Heidegger's critique of technology. For Patočka (and for Heidegger) the particular way we live today as beings that employ technology without a corresponding responsibility is problematic and even dangerous.<sup>22</sup> The *Heretical Essays* argue that as a consequence of the wars of the twentieth century, history has transformed the world into a war for peace - a war where everyday citizens are used as combatants in a war of economics.<sup>23</sup> Patočka argues that armies of businessmen and workers compete in a war for the things of the world. We have governments which guarantee peace and focus on growing economies so we can celebrate peace through consumption and the continuation of our roles as performers for an economy. Our actions are not responsible because largely we are living for this moment of peace than rather than for life as a whole, across time. We have fallen for the illusion that our abstracted ideas such as 'progress' and 'enlightenment' etc. are total explanations for the human predicament. These are in reality but masks that hide that the repeated attempt by humans who dare step outside of the over-determined historical world through rising out of fallenness through actions challenge our servitude to present technological world.<sup>24</sup>

Recovering a community of the shaken is Patočka's answer to the responsibility-less world. The shaken are described by Patočka in reference to World War One combatants as who suspend their everyday lives whilst fighting at the front. At the front all of the interests that normally occupy a person disappear and one senses that the best thing to do is to fight for the destruction of a world which was horrible enough to place them at the front line in the first place.<sup>25</sup> The desire for destruction turns into a realisation that one can transcend one's situation by choosing to become a sacrifice. The soldier becomes a sacrifice for life itself when, free from ordinary everyday concerns, they fight at the front and decide to no longer be

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 328.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 328-329.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 335.

<sup>25</sup> Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 126



a coerced statistic –they can in stepping into the zone of risk that the front presents risk themselves for no other reason than life. The meaning of their sacrifice is found in the irreducibility of their actions to calculable usable resources.<sup>26</sup> Their sacrifice points to “the persistent presence of something that does not appear in the calculations of the technological world.”<sup>27</sup> The sacrifice is a radical turning away from the ordinary everydayness in order to add a richness to life, not any particular life but to the experience of life.<sup>28</sup> Sacrifices can be repeated by others who share in the transformative power of sacrifice for refocusing man’s attention to truth. The shaken, in *The Heretical Essays* are those individuals who can in solidarity replicate the example of the soldier in turning away from everydayness to uncover “a new primordial truth.”<sup>29</sup> The shaken bring the understanding of the significance of sacrifice for making explicit the relation between “the essential core of man and the finite ground of our understanding.”<sup>30</sup>

Avazier Tucker points out that for Patočka the dissident is like Socrates, acting as a combatant for truth in a society that is hostile to such conflict.<sup>31</sup> The hostility arises because the third movement has been lost for the majority of that society who are immersed in the calculable roles society has set them. As in Plato’s cave allegory where the prisoners are hostile to the philosopher upon his return to the cave, the voice of the shaken can bring anger and resentment. Edward Findlay argues that for Patočka shaking one’s roots is the prerogative of philosophy. Only a politics that incorporates philosophy is responsible.<sup>32</sup> Findlay points out that for Patočka politics is philosophy in practice insofar as politics is the practice of life.

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<sup>26</sup> Patočka, ‘Dangers of Technicization’, 337.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 337.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 338-339.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 333.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 339.

<sup>31</sup> Avazier Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 30.

<sup>32</sup> Findlay *Caring*, 108

The dissident is hence a philosopher who can bring philosophy back into politics. In the *Heretical Essays*, Patočka writes that the solution to the problem of the twentieth century and the loss of the third movements is located in “the solidarity of the shaken.” This is a community of philosophers who can shake human beings into an awareness of the possibility of their own freedom.<sup>33</sup> They are combatants against their own society. Sacrifice for Patočka is the act of a philosopher. That is only someone who sees the ordinary world as a problem and then reaches for a means to reject the forces of the present which seek to order and manage life can make a sacrifice for life. Patočka attributes greatness and nobility to the philosopher, not in wealth, but in what they can give the polis. Hence in its ability to promote a philosophical investigation into the heart of the question of being human, sacrifice can be great. The greatness is dependent upon the individual making the sacrifice in order to transcend everydayness. In this sense sacrifice seems an egalitarian concept as all one needs is the reflective capacity to see that life is more than the ordinary and everyday. One must first understand that life is finite, embrace this finitude and reject everyday concerns which encourage one to give in to a determined mode of life. In other words sacrifice, in order to be great, must aim at a great expression of life.

In the terms of the two cases presented in the first section the argument could be made that both the housewife and the filmmaker fulfil this criteria. Both are risking something dear to them, their lives, and one can assume their motives are for sustaining their integrity, (they cannot remain silent any longer), and presumably, through their risky actions, their being is intensified, the content of their lives takes on a richer aspect and their confrontation with their own finitude enriches their being in so far as they feel that the loss of life is better than remaining in ideological chains. There is, in both cases, as far as the analysis thus far has proceeded, something of the philosopher in both cases.

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<sup>33</sup>Findlay 141

That for Patočka the true dissident is a philosopher is more explicit in *Plato and Europe* where Patočka discusses the return to the cave by the philosopher in Plato's cave allegory. Patočka writes that all philosophy takes place in Plato's cave.<sup>34</sup> Philosophers are expected to exercise their duty and return to the cave “because something like human life, that is, life where care for the soul is possible, is only realisable under these conditions.”<sup>35</sup> Patočka turns to Aristotle when he discusses the return to the cave because Aristotle helps Patočka philosophise in the cave. Whereas Plato directs the soul vertically, away from the appearance to the form, Aristotle, for Patočka, offers a horizontal thinking which analyses the movement of appearances which make a form of the appearance.<sup>36</sup> That is, Aristotle allows the third movement to grasp the other two movements in the cave as universally significant. For Aristotle, understanding is of the movement of existence, not a static form. Hence inside Plato's cave (in the world of appearance) Aristotle's philosophy represents an attempt at promoting the third movement of existence – the analysis of action.

In Patočka's philosophy, in taking account of a specific context (in the cave), it might be necessary that in caring for the soul one must risk oneself. One must become, or risk becoming a sacrifice. Eddo Evink describes Patočka's thoughts on sacrifice.<sup>37</sup> “Responsibility is always taken in a specific moment, for specific people, at a specific place, in a specific decision, for which a specific account can be given.”<sup>38</sup> In other words the philosopher, upon reflection on responsibility, takes account of their action and in this taking account bestows meaning on the sacrifice. This is not a responsibility to a universal form of justice, but a

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<sup>34</sup>Jan Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, trans. Petr Lom (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 189.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid, 191.

<sup>37</sup> Eddo Evink “Patočka and Derrida on Responsibility” in A.-T. Tymieniecka (ed.), *Analecta Husserliana LXXXIX*, (Houten: Springer 2006), 307-321.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid 319.

taking account, inside the cave, to a specific time, place and context.<sup>39</sup> Hence the dissident chooses to die rather than accepting an appearance of life as a life of things. There is a natural human dignity in being-towards-death that the dissident embodies in their sacrifice.<sup>40</sup>

Reflection (taking account of one's situation and context), inside the cave, which grasps appearances and offers transcendence of particulars, requires a community of philosophers. Patočka writes that sacrifice "might lead to a transformation in the way we understand both life and the world".<sup>41</sup> In order to change humanity's understanding of life there needs to be free thinkers who interpret the act of the sacrifice, they do not determine the meaning of the sacrifice but instead understand the rupture with the ordinary that the sacrifice makes. Hence it is important that the shaken are shaken in solidarity (as a community). This throws a negative light on the sacrifice of the housewife from the earlier thought experiment.

When describing the sacrifice of the shaken Patočka employs the language of heroism. In describing the act where the shaken individual risks themselves Patočka uses the term *aristeia*.<sup>42</sup> The *aristeia* is the moment when the hero acts heroically, for example when Achilles routs the Trojan army. For Patočka the *aristeia* is available only to a few "who are capable of becoming gods".<sup>43</sup> We can turn to an earlier essay of Patočka's for a clue to what he means with this heroic language. In an earlier essay Patočka claimed that sacrifice could only be made by a person who understands that risk opens one up to the richness of life lived for more than technological life presents as. He writes,

And he who takes on this path gives to others not simply something that can be placed  
"on order,"... but rather... this glimpse of a reversal, a new primordial truth."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Patočka, "Dangers of Technicization", 339.

<sup>42</sup> Evink, 319.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Patočka, "Dangers of Technicization", 332.

Thus the need for a community for whom the sacrifice is a gift, and the heroic integrity to risk all are the conditions for Patočka of making a sacrifice. Evink's list of meaningful risky dissenters include: Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Andrey Sakharov and Patočka himself – they are all public intellectuals with an audience.<sup>45</sup> Avazier Tucker compares Patočka's death to Socrates and claims that Patočka left behind a story which would win him immortal fame.<sup>46</sup> Tucker claims that Patočka makes a hero out of himself in risking his life with the Charter 77 movement.<sup>47</sup>

So in turning our attention to the two cases which began this paper we can ask if about their sacrifices. That each one has satisfied some of the conditions for having a meaningful sacrifice by Patočka's standards can't be denied. Both have found something wrong with the way that their lives were being determined by a dangerous system and chose to do more than simply live in the determined rules. Their risk is admirable and important. However it does seem that sacrifice requires a public who appreciate what the sacrificial victim has given in order for it to be truly meaningful. That is if the sacrificial victim is not noticed, does the significance of the sacrificial act really help to unlock our ground of understanding so that we may have a closer relation to truth? The answer colours our interpretation of the sacrifice of the housewife. That an admirable strength of character has been displayed by the unknown victim is worth noting, as is the probability that her actions were born of a realisation that life should be more than what was offered; however, if sacrifice is to be a practice of philosophy then I would assume that the sacrifice needs to connect to the lives of others in order to meaningfully participate in the uncovering of our relation to the world. In other words the realisation alone is not enough.

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<sup>45</sup> Evink, 319.

<sup>46</sup> Tucker, *Philosophy*, 87.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

In order to hone down our answer to the question of whether the public reception of a sacrifice is a meaningful lens to understand a sacrifice the next section will explore the approach to sacrifice of Vaclav Havel.

### **Vaclav Havel and the Power of the Powerless**

Havel produced no systematic philosophy; however, his plays, open letters, essays, books and presidential diaries, although varied in medium do express a coherent set of ideas. One such idea that permeates his oeuvre is that sacrifice is made for personal reasons of conscience and always with a mind to addressing a particular political issue.<sup>48</sup> Karel Kosik criticised Havel for muddying Patocka's thought by losing the focus on the significance of acting for truth.<sup>49</sup> Kosik contends that Havel's focus on concrete political issues loses the philosophical significance of Patocka's recovery of the ground of human understanding. Havel would, I contend have no problem with such allegations. His thought is not an attempt to recover the essential ground of understanding from the dangers of technological thinking. Instead, for Havel, that technological thinking has promoted instrumental ways of relating to the world has produced detrimental political effects.<sup>50</sup> In one of his first public addresses as president Havel points out the architectural waste land of Bratislava that he saw from an airplane window.<sup>51</sup> He lambastes the previous socialist government claiming that they must not have wanted to look out their windows. For Havel, the glance out the window "enabled

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Zantovsky, *Havel; A Life*, (New York: Atlantic Books, 2014), 3.

<sup>49</sup> Karel Kosik, "The third Munich" trans. Miloslav Bednar in *Telos: A Quarterly Journal of Critical Thought*. No. 94 (Winter 1993-1994): 152-154.

<sup>50</sup> Start of Summer Meditations.

<sup>51</sup> Vaclav Havel, "New Year's Address to the Nation" trans. Paul Wilson in *The Art of the Impossible*, (New York: Alfred A Knopf Inc, 1994), 3-4.

[him] to understand faster and better the situation into which we had gotten ourselves.”<sup>52</sup> This anecdote is telling for getting a grip on Havel’s thought. Havel’s is a thinker whose thought is a lived attempt to change what he sees out of the window. His sense of conscience which led him to take great risks came from a sense that specific problems could be fixed.

Havel’s play *Protest*, contains an argument about the meaning of a sacrifice and who can be expected to give one. Written in 1979 *Protest* is a one act play with two characters, Vanek and Stanek.<sup>53</sup> It is a part of a trilogy of one act plays called the Vanek plays in which the somewhat autobiographical Vanek talks through moral issues of dissidence. The play begins with Vanek, who has just been released from jail, visiting his brother Stanek in order to obtain his signature on a letter which calls for the release of a pop-musician who has been imprisoned. Stanek is unaware of his friends reason for visiting and is attempting to get Vanek to write a letter to get the same musician released (Stanek’s daughter is pregnant to this musician). The entirety of the play involves a subtle but complex discourse between the two on the nature of dissent and dissent’s relationship to ethical meaningful action. James Pontusso claims that the play represents Havel’s attempt to lay a foundation for morality.<sup>54</sup> For Pontusso, as the play develops and Stanek backs away from signing the document, the audience’s recognition of the absence of morality from Stanek’s action reveals the presence of morality to the audience.<sup>55</sup> This is not my reading. It is not clear that Stanek is entirely immoral. Stanek does not want to sign as he is frightened at the prospect of risking his good standing in society; however Stanek also offers some criticism on the expectation that dissidents make the risks. It is improper according to Stanek, to always expect a community

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>53</sup> Vaclav Havel “Protest” in *The Garden Party and Other Plays*, trans. Vera Blackwell (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 239-266.

<sup>54</sup> James Pontusso, *Vaclav Havel; Civic Responsibility in a Postmodern Age* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 90.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 91.

of dissidents to make sacrifices of themselves. It is more the point that their conversation make the value of sacrifice ambiguous.

The argument between them is quite important in understanding Havel's thoughts on sacrifice and dissent. At the beginning of the play Stanek makes a comment about the terrible state of politics. Vanek responds that things are not so bad to which Stanek has a cutting retort.

Stanek: Forgive me, Ferdinand, but you don't happen to live in a normal environment. All you know are people who manage to resist this rot. You just keep on supporting and encouraging each other. You've no idea of the sort of environment I've got to put up with! You're lucky you no longer have anything to do with it. Makes you sick at your stomach.<sup>56</sup>

There is a pause following this pointed suggestion that the dissident is not a part of the normal community. Vanek offers a way out to his brother by suggesting that this other environment is the television industry in which Stanek works to which Stanek agrees. Stanek's answer is suspicious. It does appear that he is making a point that dissidents have their world and everyone else has theirs – nothing to do his work in the television. If we import Patocka's thoughts on the shaken into this analysis of the play we see that the idea that the dissident lives in another world to the citizen has traction. The shaken are by their very nature free from ordinary everyday concerns because of their risky behaviour. What is interesting in *Protest* is that a community of shaken might not be that helpful in achieving the political goals that may sacrifices aim at. There is a sense in *Protest* that things are not good because of the gap between the world of the dissidents and the world of the everyday.

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<sup>56</sup> Havel "Powerless," 245.



Vanek is doing visiting rounds to various members of the community to have the document signed. It is clear from the outset that Stanek is not going to be one of the signatories. However, he waxes lyrical about how signing would make him free. He claims that if he signed he could face his daughter and her partner with equanimity, and more importantly live with his conscience which screams at him to sign. He would lose his job, but he doesn't like it anyway, and so that might be a good thing. In the end, what convinces Stanek not to sign is his realisation that signing would not make a political change. In considering what impact his signature on the document would have on those who are accommodating the regime, Stanek comes to the conclusion that his dissent would not shake anyone.<sup>57</sup> In an ironic twist at the end of the play Stanek receives a phone call announcing that the musician has been released. Vanek claims that all is well and that it is a good thing he didn't upset the regime by publishing the letter.

In unpacking this series of events what is significant is that Vanek remains constant. Stanek, although never convincing in his intention to sign the document, oscillates between holding the view that dissent is a good thing to dissent being a bad thing. Stanek is wary of society's expectation that dissidents carry the burden of challenging the system and he is wary of the dissident's ability to actually make a difference. Vanek's consistency is in conflict with Stanek's variableness. However, rather than pointing to an essential ground of morality in the stability of Vanek, I find a reluctance in the play to judge Stanek for his refusal to sign. The attack on the ordinary everyday world that the dissident is supposed to embody is missing from *Protest*. Both Vanek and Stanek are considering signing in order to free a pop-musician from prison. Vanek must sign as a matter of conscience and Stanek convinces his conscience that to act would not have effect and therefore his conscience does not demand a signature. Perhaps Havel is arguing that grand sacrificial gestures are meaningful when a

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 262.

public profile allows them to have a great public meaning? There is some truth to this but it is better to see in Stanek's refusal, Havel's own optimism in hoping that humanity's natural goodness can prevail over ideological modes of thinking.

Havel repeatedly claims to suffer from optimism in that he believes most people to be naturally good. Of course he hopes for the Stanek's of this world to take a stand but he does not judge them for not taking one. That the individual must take account of themselves, to themselves is clearly an idea that Havel has developed from Patočka. In Havel, however, the explicit political nature of the moral call for sacrifice imparts an egalitarian inflection to the idea. Taking account of oneself is not a task strictly for philosophy; it is a task for everyone in any situation. If there is a judgement of Stanek located in the tone of the play it is in the pronouncement that change would only be possible if everyone behaved as the dissident does. Stanek suggests that dissidents, in taking on the preservation of morality in society as their task have set themselves a monumental, superhuman task.<sup>58</sup> Vanek responds that rather than holding the nation's morality in their hands that Vanek is relying on the natural goodness of people. This self-professed naivety of Havel's is less naive than it appears at first glance. Protest is not a play about Vanek's sacrifice it is about Vanek initiating a discussion about what it would take to improve things.

In *Summer Meditations*, the first work published by Havel after he took on the role of President, Havel finds political hope in appealing to the natural goodness in the Czech population. He calls it a slumbering potential and writes that politicians have a duty to awaken it.<sup>59</sup> There is little to be gained in demanding sacrifice of those who can't find the fortitude to give one. There is also little to be gained in demonising those people as well. An interesting example from Czech history loosely involving Havel will make this point clearer. After the formation of the Charter 77 dissident movement which gathered signatures to

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 246-247.

<sup>59</sup> Vaclav Havel, *Summer Meditations*, trans. Paul Wilson, (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 4.

demand that the socialist government respect various human rights treaties it had signed up to, the government responded with a public show of other artists who were herded on to a stage and asked to sign a document that supported the current regime.<sup>60</sup> Of course many signed and many did not. Havel's biographer Michael Zantovsky argues that not signing did not require the greatest strength of moral fibre, yet I'm not sure that Havel would agree with him. The incident brings out a real case of Vanek and Stanek's predicament. Vanek appeals to the moral goodness of Stanek who, like the artists who signed the counter Charter 77 document. Yet the decision to not sign is a big one. As an artist, the fact that one might not be able to make art anymore as a consequence of not signing is a grave prospect. Especially if signing the document would have no real impact as it was, by Zantovsky's account, an obviously staged signing. Protest allows for caution and encourages a dialogue with conscience but not a call for sacrifice. If Stanek had decided that he must sign then that was a decision for Stanek. By shifting the focus on sacrifice from dissidents in a philosophical search for a richer experience of being to ordinary people pondering on the impact of politics on their ordinary everyday life, Havel moves the discussion to an interesting point. Sacrifice is not called for; however if one feels that sacrifice is necessary for one's peace of mind then sacrifice is an important gift for attempting political change.

In his famous and influential essay 'The Power of the Powerless' Havel writes allegorically of a greengrocer who is compelled by fear to place a communist slogan in his window.<sup>61</sup> Havel employs some thought experiments to tease out what options the greengrocer has. He could continue to place the placard in the window which is a small behaviour, amongst other similar behaviours which reinforce the power of the ruling ideology. This option would allow him to live his life in relative comfort. On the other hand he could refuse to place the placard, which really has nothing to do with his job as a

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<sup>60</sup> Zantovsky, *Havel*, 181.

<sup>61</sup> Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*, (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1985), 27.

greengrocer, and upset the system in a small way. This option would bring him into conflict with the regime and would carry some consequences; however for Havel, the greengrocer would be living in truth - living 'as if' the regime had no hold over him. Similarities to Patocka's ideas of dissent are apparent. Both think that the best life is a life that risks its comfort for existential honesty. However in Havel the focus is on these small cases of dissent. The ideology is maintained through small actions and it is brought down by these small actions. Havel is not classifying dissidents as being in a similar set to world war one front line soldiers. Havel instead appeals to small bursts of displays of humanity wherever politics over-determines ones identity.

It is significant that the subject of Havel's thinking on dissent is a greengrocer. The greengrocer is not a philosopher, is not familiar with phenomenology, does not reflect in the manner prescribed by Patocka and yet still meaningfully dissents in becoming a sacrifice. Havel's oeuvre is an attempt to explain his ideas to everyone. There seems to be a trust in Havel that every person is capable of a life in truth. Havel clearly hasn't abandoned all of the language of his phenomenological forebears; but it is undeniable that in Havel's work the concern is less with the specific epistemological details of reflection and more with encouraging individual reflection *en masse*. This is the strength of Havel's writing according to Tony Judt. In Judt's book *Thinking the Twentieth Century*, he makes the point that Havel is effective as a writer for dissidents precisely because of the accessibility of his language and examples.<sup>62</sup> For Judt, what Havel achieves in dropping the rigor of phenomenological language but adapting key concepts such as 'authenticity' to his more generally readable writing style is a compelling example that can be understood in the west and locally.<sup>63</sup> The importance of the greengrocer allegory, for Judt is the message that for all local citizens,

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<sup>62</sup> Tony Judt and Timothy Synder, *Thinking the Twentieth Century* (London: William Heinemann, 2012) 235.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid

“their actions, however isolated, are not without meaning.”<sup>64</sup> The meaning is not a heroic meaning as it is in Patočka. Instead, for Havel, the small contributions that each individual makes for their own conscience are significant in themselves.

A better way of conceiving the dissident sacrifice in Havel is rather as a search for integrity than for truth. Havel does not see dissent as being the particular gift of the philosopher; it is a task for everyone in their private search for a clear conscience. Reflection is not the rigorous philosophical tool that it is in Patočka’s thought; rather reflection shows the individual how best to serve their integrity. In his last major work, *To the Castle and Back*, Havel writes that his entire mental life seems to him to have been an incessant engagement with a fear of his place in the order of things.<sup>65</sup> His conscience tormented him, he asks himself continually was the right thing to do, and what has my action achieved? Havel embodies Patočka’s third movement described above. Yet this third movement explicitly relishes its ordinary everyday situation. This is not a debasement of Patočka’s thought as some critics have argued.<sup>66</sup> There is richness to Havel’s more egalitarian conception of sacrifice which is not counter to Patočka’s but can stand as an expansion on Patočka’s thinking. Havel finds importance in the sacrifice and then expands to include pride for the small acts which can follow a sacrifice and which change the political behaviour of people.

In ‘The Power of the Powerless’ Havel argues that a living in truth does not only require ‘dissident’ actions. Instead a life in truth covers a whole host of more modest and mostly anonymous actions which might not have any political impact.<sup>67</sup> Political impact, for Havel,

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid

<sup>65</sup> Vaclav Havel, *To the Castle and Back*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Alfred A Knopf Inc, 2007), 339.

<sup>66</sup> See Edward Findlay “Classical Ethics and Postmodern Critique: Political Philosophy in Václav Havel and Jan Patočka”, *The Review of Politics*, vol.61, no.3 (1999): 409.

See also Karel Kosik, “The third Munich” trans. Miloslav Bednar in *Telos: A Quarterly Journal of Critical Thought*. No. 94 (Winter 1993-1994): 154.

<sup>67</sup> Havel “Power,” 64.

happens usually as a kind of accident where one has the fortune to be in a circumstance where one's actions have reaching repercussions that are obvious.<sup>68</sup> The importance of these modest actions, or actions which go unnoticed is that they allow a richness to enter what Havel calls the "independent life of society."<sup>69</sup> The independent life of society is a somewhat liberal understanding of society which includes self-education, creative activity and meaningful discourse. Havel explains himself using a metaphor of an ice-berg. He argues that acts of dissent, the visible and public acts are the small visible tip of the ice-berg that is supported by the more modest and probably private acts in that society. Without a rich independent life of society the heroic acts are impossible.<sup>70</sup> That is, without teachers having private discussions with students about unofficial politics, or without professors giving illegal lectures in basements, or without an official looking the other way when it would be right to look away, without these actions and others of their kind major acts of dissent have no meaningful ground from which to sprout.

It is a liberal vision of individuals searching for a private integrity through small acts that upset the power of a ruling ideology. This focus is clear in Havel's essay 'Politics and Conscience.'<sup>71</sup> In this essay Havel explains his ideas of non-political politics. This political theory is what Havel means by the small private actions which sustain the independent life of society. Such actions create a sense of the importance of truth and morality into politics.<sup>72</sup> This furnishes the ground for a removal of power from the ruling ideology. For Havel each individual can contribute what they can. Ideology is supported by the sum total of the small movements of every citizen; hence the ideology is brought down through the removal of those small acts of support. Public awareness of acts of dissent doesn't enter into it, or if it

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>71</sup> Václav Havel *Open Letters*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 249-271.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 271.

does it might serve as an example for others. For Havel the importance is on justifying one's actions to oneself. Each person's sacrifice is equal in the magnitude of importance.

Tony Judt wrote quite an early piece on Eastern European dissent in which he describes Havel's conception of non-political politics as aiming at a society in which the issue is not an absence of political ideas, but rather a political situation in which the system finds an outpost in which citizen as they behave somewhat mechanistically.<sup>73</sup> In his words, "it is the people, not political programs, which need to be replenished."<sup>74</sup> Judt criticises dissident intellectuals who fall for the illusion that they are on a front line of combat by producing 200 *samizdat* articles that gain notoriety not for their literary merit but by the opposition to them from the government. In reality the underground academics had a handful of readers and no one else knew about them.<sup>75</sup> The gulf that Stanek accuses Vanek of standing beyond is apparent in Judt's criticism. In Havel's understanding of dissent samizdat activities are important, but so is the refusal of a worker to conform.

Havel has a tendency in his writing to be highly critical of himself. His writing is fused with self-deprecating anecdotes. This is a deliberate attempt to take away any heroic gloss from his activities. He writes at length about his fears, worries, moments of overwhelming guilt and even haemorrhoids. In his 2011 feature film, *Leaving* (*Odcházení*), the central character appears to be a warts and all satire of himself - a President at the end of his time of service, reluctant to leave the comfort of the cloister-like palace.<sup>76</sup> The film is harsh to characters who offer a kind of worship to the aging President. This deliberate attempt by Havel to avoid any heroic connotations to his activity is a key component of his idea of sacrifice. There is little point making heroes of dissidents when small actions are as

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<sup>73</sup> Tony Judt, "The Dilemmas of Dissidence: The Politics of Opposition in East-Central Europe" in *Eastern European Politics and Societies*, 2 (1988): 196

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid 229.

<sup>76</sup> Vaclav Havel, *Odcházení*, DVD, Directed by Vaclav Havel, Prague: Česká Televize, 2011.

politically significant as large, well-documented and discussed ones. The greengrocer loses as much as the famous dissident and contributes as much.

## **Conclusion**

Re-write conclusion.

The greengrocer in Havel's analogy dissents best when he refuses to place a placard sent to him by the government. He is putting himself at great risk to do so. There are of course many other ways that the greengrocer can risk himself. It is obvious that not all risky activities are appropriate. For example the greengrocer, if he has no experience making films, and no audience to show it to, probably should avoid making his stand against the regime through the production of a film. That is best left to filmmakers who are more likely to have some kind of traction through their work. Instead for Havel there is a real focus on avoiding the behaviours that one is being coerced to do. Behaviour that risks oneself without upsetting the wheels and cogs of the system one is fighting against is simply a silly sacrifice and definitely not a magnificent gift.

What is important is that in dissent, the actions of all have equal significance insofar as the magnitude of the risk is the same for everyone. As long as actions which place a person in risk are appropriate, and I will leave that word in its vagueness as it is beyond the scope of my thought to prescribe what is appropriate, then the actions of all who upset the machinations of ideology, whether those actions go recognised or not, are of equal worth. The letter writer in our example perhaps did not make the best choice relative to their possibilities in making their sacrifice; however she could have made as magnificent an impact as the film maker did, even if she remained unrecognised for it.



